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ESCAPE FROM BOREDOM:
A Defector's Story

by Nora Beloff

Young, attractive, and comparatively well-to-do, Galina Orionova defected from Moscow last year, leaving behind a job in a prestigious government institute and welcoming an unpredictable future. In telling why she did so, she reveals much about the workings of Soviet society and the chicaneries of Soviet bureaucracy.

At London's Heathrow Airport, Soviet diplomat Alexander Ekimenko was stunned by the answer to his routine question, "What was your job?" "Research fellow at the Institute of the United States of America and Canada," replied the young woman defector.

The newcomer was Galina Orionova, a beautiful blonde, who arrived in England attired in a black, well-tailored velvet suit, white angora jersey, and white cossack-style leather boots, looking as if she had done very well in the Soviet system. So why, in the early evening of April 30, 1979, a few days before her thirty-third birthday, did she seek political asylum? Galina's answer is simple: "Only because I could not get out sooner."

Most noted Americans interested in Soviet affairs—Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, Edmund Muskie, Edward Kennedy, George Kennan, Marshall Shulman—have visited the Institute. Diplomats and Sovietologists have passed through the portals of what was once Prince Volkonsky's elegant town house. Russian families would give their bottom ruble to get their children into this particular branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, where the staff has access to the Western world.

Galina departed from the Institute on very good terms. A few weeks previously she had delivered a two-hour address, without notes, to sixty members of the Institute staff on her special subject, American–Japanese relations. Her superiors had congratulated her and told her she would be promoted to a senior fellowship. At her age this indicated excellent progress up the hierarchical ladder.

American visitors recently returned from Moscow say that her name at the Institute now evokes envy rather than anger. Yet Americans need to be wary of having their names linked with that kind of defector. Galina, to whom personal loyalty is the highest virtue, was willing to recount her experience on condition that she would not name any American friends: "It would blight their chances of ever getting back." Though she wants to make England her home, she hopes to visit the United States as soon as she can afford the fares. Several of the Institute's regular visitors have invited her to stay.

Galina spent ten years at the Institute and considers herself fortunate to have been admitted. "Pure luck that my graduation in 1969 happened to coincide with the creation of a new institute of U.S. affairs which needed a Far Eastern expert. A few years later I would have been automatically excluded. All the jobs are now reserved for the children of very exalted families."

Her own family belongs to the minor Bolshevik nobility. "My father, a Tartar born in Kazan on the Volga [the bone structure of his daughter's face is more Asian than European], came to Moscow after the Revolution to train as an engineer. He joined the Party while Lenin was still alive. Mother, a Russian from Vologda, met him when they were both students. All his life Father's income was enough to relieve Mother from having to take a job." (Galina is scornful of the notion that Soviet women are emancipated because they go out to work. To her, the combination of job, children, household, and endless queueing is a dreadful form of slavery.) "But our family is nowhere nearly important enough for me to get into the really exclusive institutions. Unlike ordinary workers, Father